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Recent major legislation, such as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), has made parents' involvement in their children's education a national priority. School districts nationwide are being encouraged to reexamine their parent involvement policies and programs and to demonstrate innovative approaches in order to obtain Federal education dollars. In particular, eligibility for Title I funding, available to school districts in high poverty areas, is now contingent upon the development of "compacts" in which families and schools agree to assume mutual responsibility for children's learning: partnerships must be forged between homes, schools, and communities, requiring an unprecedented level of contact and communication between parents and educators (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

While most practitioners and researchers support the policy direction of increased parent involvement, few agree about what constitutes effective involvement. Confusion persists regarding the activities, goals, and desired outcomes of various parent involvement programs and policies. A major source of this confusion is the lack of scientific rigor in the research informing practice and policy. Because of this, less is known about parent involvement than commonly is assumed. Nonetheless, early studies suggesting the importance of parent involvement are treated as definitive, regardless of the equivocal nature of the data, and they are used to support the position that all types of parent involvement are important.

RESEARCH FINDINGS TO DATE

Years of practice wisdom, theory, and related areas of research (i.e., the importance of the home literacy environment, parental stimulation of children's language development, security of the parent-child attachment relationship, and parent involvement in preschool and early intervention programs) strongly suggest that parents' involvement in their children's formal schooling is vital for their academic success, even though the research evidence is less than conclusive. While methodological limitations are prevalent in the majority of parent involvement research (described below), the sound studies that do

exist have consistently found strong parent involvement effects. Moreover, the cumulative knowledge from existing studies suggests the importance of several other specific types of parent involvement, including the following:

- *provision of a stimulating literacy and material environment (Snow et al., 1991),

- *high expectations and moderate levels of parental support and supervision (Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995),

- *appropriate monitoring of television viewing and homework completion (Clark, 1993),

- *participation in joint learning activities at home (Tizard et al., 1982),

- *an emphasis on effort over ability (Stevenson, 1983), and

- *autonomy promoting parenting practices (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991).

There is mounting evidence that each of these parent involvement variables facilitates children's academic achievement. There are also indications that they do so in relatively complex ways that interact with family background and social context variables such as ethnicity, family structure, maternal employment status, socioeconomic status, and gender (Schiamberg & Chin, 1986; Milne, 1989; Tocci & Englehard, 1991; Zimilies & Lee, 1991; Lee & Croninger, 1994).

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS IN EXISTING RESEARCH

Despite the validity of some studies, much parent involvement research to date contains serious methodological flaws, which results in a lack of confidence in their findings and limits their accuracy and usefulness. In general, flaws in existing research fall into four areas: use of non-experimental design, lack of isolation of parent involvement effects, inconsistent definitions of parent involvement, and non-objective measures of parent involvement.

USE OF NON-EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

Many of the field studies examining the impact of parent involvement on children's achievement employ non-experimental designs which are too weak to allow for confidence in their findings. These designs--as compared to true experiments--do not contain the controls necessary for researchers to conclude that parent involvement is the cause of enhanced student performance. Thus, alternative explanations, other than parent involvement, cannot be ruled out.

LACK OF ISOLATION OF PARENT

INVOLVEMENT EFFECTS

SEPARATION OF THE EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

FROM THAT OF THE INVOLVEMENT OF OTHER ADULTS. Many studies did not isolate the effect of parent involvement from the benefits of extra assistance in learning. For example, in many studies, children in a parent involvement intervention were compared with children not receiving the intervention, and improvements in achievement were identified as benefits of parent involvement. Drawing such a conclusion is based on the consensus in the field that parent involvement programs have their impact not only through specific learning activities, but through changes in a network of interrelated family factors (i.e., home environment, parental expectations for their children's performance, increased cognitive stimulation) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

SEPARATION OF THE EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

FROM THAT OF OTHER INTERVENTION COMPONENTS. Researchers sometimes concluded that parent involvement was the critical factor in the success of an intervention program that offered a variety of concurrent activities, such as an educational curriculum for children or social services for the family. However, they failed to test the specific effects of parent involvement in analyses independent of the effects of other aspects of the program. Conclusions regarding the specific impact of parent involvement are not justified in such studies.

INCONSISTENT DEFINITIONS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

While many studies have measured the construct of parent involvement, few have operationalized it the same way. Some researchers have focused on attitudinal components of parent involvement by defining it as parental aspirations or expectations for the child's educational success. Other researchers have focused on behavioral aspects of parent involvement, such as assistance with homework or attendance at parent-teacher conferences. In other cases parent involvement was conceptualized as parenting style or family interaction patterns. Such differences in definitions and measurement of parent involvement make it difficult to assess cumulative knowledge across different studies.

Even when focusing on the same aspect of parent involvement, researchers operationalized it inconsistently. For example, while several studies have examined the impact of the quality of the home environment on children's academic achievement, rarely did two studies define home environment in the same way. In one, the home

environment was measured as maternal involvement and responsiveness, avoidance of restriction, organized environment, play facilitation, and daily variety. Alternatively, another study defined the home environment as the number of parents in the home, the home library, reading at home, watching television, working on homework, absence from school, parent involvement, and family resources.

NON-OBJECTIVE MEASURES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Researchers frequently assessed parent involvement by the parent's (or some other informant's) report rather than by observation or objective measure. Thus, more is known about what parent say they do than about what they actually do. The bias in using subjective reports in parent involvement research should be a serious concern. Lack of objective data becomes especially problematic when information about parent involvement and child achievement outcomes is reported by the same person; the result can be a distortion of the statistical relationships obtained, producing stronger correlations between the two than would otherwise be the case. Some researchers have attempted to increase the validity of self-report data by measuring parent involvement from more than one source (parent, teachers, students). However, this approach has resulted in low correspondence among the different respondents, indicating that one or both reports may have been inaccurate.

Self report measures of parent involvement have another drawback in that they tend to be closed-ended surveys that cannot fully capture the dynamic nature of parents' involvement in their children's education. When parents visit schools, meet with teachers, read to their school-aged children, and assist their children with homework, complex interactions are at work. Many of these processes could better be explored through open-ended and observational techniques, which would produce rich data, shed light on multi-faceted interactions and relationships over time, and generate new hypotheses about the role of parent involvement.

INACCURACY OF PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

Program evaluations may be the most challenging form of applied educational field research that exists. Unfortunately, they tend to be among the weaker parent involvement studies, plagued by many of the flaws described above. In addition to the general constraints of conducting research in an applied setting, program evaluations pose special obstacles for researchers because of the clinical and ethical issues involved in withholding treatment or wait-listing participants who clearly might benefit from the program (i.e., at-risk students, low-income families).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future parent involvement studies must overcome the methodological limitations

identified above in order to increase their accuracy and utility. While increasing the rigor of parent involvement research in educational settings, researchers will also have to be more sensitive to the needs of parents and staff who may consider implementation of some of the more rigorous evaluation procedures intrusive and judgmental. Including parents in the development of measures and protocols may ease their concerns and also provide a mechanism for obtaining valuable input. In addition, funding allocations to program evaluations and applied educational research in general will need to increase.

USE OF EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

Only one study design, the true experiment, adequately overcomes all the threats to internal validity problematic in educational research. The critical component of this design, random assignment to the control and experimental groups, rules out pre-test differences between groups, so that differences at post-test can be attributed to the independent variable--parent involvement, in this case--with confidence.

ISOLATION OF THE EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In order to truly understand and document the full impact of parent involvement, studies must separate parent involvement effects from related variables and from the impact of other adults involved in the program by: (1) specifically measuring a parent's involvement (i.e., type and level) separate from other components of the intervention in order to assess its independent impact on the identified outcomes, and (2) evaluating the differential influences of the content of a program and the deliverer (parent or other adult) of the program on outcomes.

CLARIFICATION OF THE DEFINITION OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Researchers must make explicit which aspect of involvement is being measured and how it fits into the broader construct of parent involvement in order to create a coherent understanding of the importance of different aspects of involvement. To ease researchers' ability to compare their findings with the work of others, and to build upon existing knowledge in a systematic fashion, researchers will need to develop and validate common instruments for measuring parent involvement across a variety of settings. Drawing on Epstein's (1994) six-item classification system--covering school-home communications, parent involvement in school and community, home learning activities, and parents as decision-makers--might prove useful for developing such a measurement, as it provides a widely accepted typology of parent involvement.

OBJECTIVE MEASUREMENT OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Studies must use techniques such as direct observation of parental behavior with

standardized data collection tools, since self-report data can be unreliable.

ADDITIONAL STUDY DESIGN IMPROVEMENTS

The following issues also require further attention in parent involvement research:

LOCATION OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT. Research is needed to identify the unique and overlapping benefits of involvement at school and involvement in the home. It is clear from the existing knowledge base that involvement in these different ecological settings is not interchangeable, especially with respect to the barriers and goals of involvement.

AMOUNT OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT. The amount of involvement necessary to effect a positive impact on children needs to be identified. Questions regarding threshold effects of involvement (the minimum amount of involvement necessary to have an effect) and overload/ceiling effects (the saturation point of involvement) have yet to be adequately addressed. This is especially true for involvement at school, which may interact with other parental activities to increase parental stress and/or lead to overload. Thus, studies should attempt to determine the optimal amount of parent involvement.

COMPREHENSIVENESS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT. More research is needed to determine whether parents need to be involved in all aspects of a parent involvement program (planning, implementation, evaluation) in order for their involvement to be valid and beneficial. Currently, some practitioners attempt to engage parents in all levels of school functioning or at all levels of implementation of a parent program within the school in the belief that the more comprehensive the involvement of parents, the greater the benefit to children's education.

COMPLEXITY OF INVOLVEMENT PATTERNS. Researchers need to take into account the complex and transactional nature of interrelationships between parent involvement and its outcomes. For example: (1) relationships among different types of parent involvement; (2) the relative importance of different aspects of parent involvement at different points in the life of the student; and (3) the complex processes by which different types of involvement interact to mediate, moderate, or suppress each other.

ANCILLARY BENEFICIARIES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT. Much remains to be learned about the impact of discrete parent involvement activities and particular beneficiaries, such as the parents themselves, families, schools, and communities. For example, the impact of involvement in their children's education on parents' literacy, self-esteem, and feelings about their children has yet to be explored and documented.

DIFFERENTIAL GENDER EFFECTS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT. It is important for research studies to consider from the outset the relationships between parent involvement and student achievement separated by gender. Indeed, the research studies that have done so suggest that the specific aspects of parent involvement

considered--parental styles and parenting techniques--have different effects depending upon the gender of the child. In order to study gender differentials, research will need to generate hypotheses about which types of parent involvement are likely to have different outcomes for boys and girls.

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